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ABSTRACT

To become writers, students must see themselves as writers and be treated as writers by their teachers. Students need to find the motivation to go beyond formulas, to grapple with messy, often inchoate ideas, to find their own particular angle of vision. What rhetoricians call "invention" or "discovery" is difficult to pin down. Without a system for invention, student writers just grope about, trying this idea or that word until something interesting comes up. One problem is the assumption that at the same time writers are discovering or inventing, they are also "creating" something new. The only way to give rules for creating something new is after the fact. Writing teachers need to be aware that a middle ground exists between giving students formulas for invention and cutting them adrift in a sea of ideas. Invention comes in several forms, including rhetorical invention and perceptual invention (based in 20th century psychology). Students can be encouraged to use their senses, to explore their own processes of invention, and to compare what they do with what others report. To find motivation to move beyond formulas for invention, students probably need to play seriously--since through playing they can often bridge the gap between motivation and the making of a piece. (A 21-item bibliography for writing instructors, a list of six journals, and a list of seven important names to watch for are attached.) (RS)

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BEYOND THE FORMULA: STUDENTS BECOMING WRITERS

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Paper presented at the mid-winter meeting of the AEJMC Magazine Division, April 1991, Williamsburg VA.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

This semester I shared a piece called "Touchstones" with my freshmen, showing them how I discovered the real focus of the piece and the real ending by working and reworking the material. Oddly, these students didn't respond the way others had--they were very quiet. After class, two of my students explained, "We kept wondering where you got the ideas in the first place." They were right. I had talked about drafting but I hadn't really talked about the ways I gather ideas. Most of the time the ideas just come, if the conditions are right. For the students, though, and for any writer whose work is worth reading, invention is rather critical to the writing of a piece. Our inventions come from that self which is uniquely our own.

I've learned over the years that what the rhetoricians call "invention" or "discovery" is very difficult to pin down. Without a system for invention we just grope about, trying this idea or that word until something interesting comes up. When we talk about this process, either we sound as though we're writing recipes or we seem to have slipped back to the touchy-feely era

of the late sixties and early seventies. **Invention is very messy.** We don't like to admit that it eludes our precise analysis. And yet it does so for a very good reason.

The reason becomes clearer when we look at the roots of the words we use to name the process of getting ideas to write about. The word "invention" comes from the Latin inventio, meaning "to come upon" or "to find." The word "discover" also comes from the Latin, meaning "to uncover" or "to disclose." Even our current buzzword "heuristic" comes from the Greek word that means "to discover or find." Notice that all these verbs are transitive: we don't "find" the way we "run," we find **something**; we uncover **something**; we come upon **something**; we disclose **something**, something that's implicitly **out there to be found.**

The problem lies in our assumption that at the same time we're discovering or inventing, we're also making something new. Since the Romanticism of the early eighteenth century--perhaps earlier--we've had this crazy notion that we can actually be "creative." Notice that "creative" comes from a different sort

of metaphor: instead of "finding something on the outside," we're causing it to grow from within ourselves. In other words, when we're creative, we're creating a new, original thing from--not quite nothing--but from bits and pieces we've had floating around our brains, the flotsam and jetsam of our experiences, everyday and otherwise. To be creative is to be able to create something new, original. Isn't that what we ask from the writers of magazine articles and books?

Yet, if we think we can predict or give someone else rules for causing something new and original to grow from inside, then we're wrong. The result cannot be new and original if someone else already thought it up. The only way we can give rules for creating something new is after the fact. I can tell you how I wrote "Touchstones" afterwards. But it's hard to know, as I'm thinking through an idea, to know which pieces will turn out to be significant. Let me show you. (transparencies)

The claim of creativity, then, puts the writer squarely in the hot seat, making her responsible for the doing and the

results. It implies that the writer knows what she is doing and how to do it. It implies that she knows when the writing is good enough and when it needs more work. No wonder that students get stymied when we ask them to write something "creative" or "original." No wonder they become so fond of formulas. Showing a writer how to "be creative" is akin to telling her to "be spontaneous." It doesn't work.

Let me back up and come at the same point from a slightly different angle. Researchers have approached the problem using a train of thought something like this: If, as writers, we're both coming upon ideas and causing them to grow from within ourselves, then we need to be able to identify salient features of these processes and determine what works and what doesn't. We also need to know how they work and why. Where do we look? Well, we can go to "original" or "creative" writers and ask them how they get their ideas. Then we can try their methods for ourselves or teach them to students.

In recent years research in composition has focused on

various stages in writing--inventing, composing or drafting, and revising. Much of the research has focused on the drafting and composing and revising processes because these are most easily studied. It's easier for both researcher and writer to study what's appearing on the page than to get at the messier stuff that goes on in a writer's head before he puts pen to paper. The research on drafting and composing and revising is beyond the scope of this discussion, however, so I'll focus on a few things we've learned about invention, the sort of invention that is based on "finding the ideas within" and ultimately on finding the writer within as well.

If, in being creative, writers take pieces of flotsam and jetsam from their experience and fit these together into a whole, a magazine article, for example, or an essay, then they must grapple at the outset with at least three important features: the angle from which the subject is viewed, the voice that conveys that point of view, and the effect they hope to have on their readers.

How do we get our students to want to work on such esoterica? First, from the outset we must remember that we only create the conditions under which creativity can grow. We cannot, as I indicated earlier, teach creativity. Only when they **want** to express their own thoughts will our students invest their own time and energy willingly.

We also need to be aware that there is a middle ground between giving students formulas for invention and cutting them adrift in a sea of ideas. Either of the extremes will tend to undermine a student writer's motivation. Formulaic writing becomes too easy and too mechanical. Completely aimless drifting will undermine her self-confidence, and thus her creativity.

Invention comes in several forms. Rhetorical invention has been discussed and taught since the early Greeks. There is also perceptual invention, based in twentieth century psychology. The most famous proponent of the theory's implications is Thomas Kuhn. His book <u>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</u> has radically changed the way we think about history--we now see

major breakthroughs as a series of perceptual shifts rather than as an accumulation of facts.

In other words, perceptual invention assumes that facts are in and of themselves useless without a way to relate them to one another, without an angle of vision that connects them together. Perceptual invention also implies that what we identify as "creative" often involves a change of angle, a new way to look at or to connect the same old facts. The problem for us and for our students is that we have perceptual habits which allow us to function rather automatically in the world but which also keep us from experiencing the world as freshly as we did when we saw it for the first time.

Freshness is critical for a writer: she needs to be able to perceive the difference between a tired, stale way of connecting ideas and a fresh one. Just last week, the Sunpapers published one of Barbara's pieces, "Eggs to Ohio" in which she puzzled out why she was mailing Easter eggs to her children who were going to college in Ohio. Toward the end she notices that her actions are

a kind of grace which she then observes is "the gift of unequivocal extension." What a beautiful way to look at grace and to see how it explains her previously peculiar actions.

A writer needs not only to be able to find a new angle, that new viewpoint to illuminate the old, but also to be able to communicate that fresh vision in fresh language so that her readers too will be able to perceive its uniqueness.

To teach students to find that fresh perception, we can pull the perceptual props from under students and help them view the world in new ways. We can teach students to use their senses in new ways, to see and do things they haven't done before. One day they can be asked to smell several smells to discover the memories those smells evoke. Another day they can be asked to see how close their language can come to describing the precise way an old tennis shoe smells. Or they can be asked to feel an object or a substance in a paper bag and to write about a person they know whose voice has that texture. Still another day they can be asked to sit somewhere with their eyes closed to see

whether they can determine what's going on from the sounds they hear. As students learn by writing, rather than by reading about writing, their confidence grows and their motivation and their insight.

Students can also be encouraged to explore their own processes of invention and to compare what they do with what others report. I often ask them to read what other writers do when they're in the opening throes of a piece. Annie Dillard in "Schedules" talks about the routines she follows when she writes. In "Still Just Writing," Anne Tyler writes about trying to fit her writing into her life, sandwiching it in between painting the hallway and taking the dog to the vet to be wormed and helping an Iranian cousin find a black American coat. We also read the "Synesthesia" section in A Natural History of the Senses by Diane Ackerman in which she describes the various ways she and other writers prepare themselves to write. I talk about my own need to sit still and my equally compelling impulse to move physically, a problem I solve by knitting or driving while I try to sift

through my ideas. I also tell them that I try to wait until I feel my head is so full the ideas are spilling out on paper. But the metaphor works for only some of my students. The others just think I'm crazy.

Perceptual invention is not necessarily the best mode for all students. Our department gives good evidence of that. Some, like Monica and Barbara Walvoord and Andy Ciofalo need to begin with an enthymeme. Others like Barbara Mallonee and me begin with the germ of an idea. Some students benefit from extensive reading, comparing their ideas with others. Other students benefit from considering their readers in greater depth and from playing at being their readers until they can understand why someone else might have a viewpoint different from their own. Still others learn by playing with voices until they can imitate with ease. Somehow putting on a persona helps them sidestep the self-consciousness that hampers them when they must speak in their own voice.

We have learned that in order to become writers, students

must see themselves as writers. That means, I think, that we treat them as writers, if not as fully fledged, then as fledglings we have taken under our wing. They need to find the motivation to go beyond formulas, to grapple with those messy, often inchoate ideas, to find their own particular angle of vision. To find this motivation, they probably need to play seriously--since through playing they can often bridge the fearsome gap between motivation and the making of a piece. When they play seriously, they can get beyond those fears and that self-consciousness to the joy that comes from seeing writing as a process of making something uniquely theirs.

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Journal of Advnaced Composition
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Important Names to Watch For

Robert Connors
Lisa Ede
Peter Elbow
Linda Flower
John Hayes
Andrea Lunsford
Donald Murray